Drug Addiction and Capitalism: Too Close to the Body

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In the Road Runner cartoon, a classic moment is the following scene: at some point in his constant chase after the ever-elusive Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote, by accident, runs over a cliff. Wile E. Coyote does not immediately fall down into the canyon below, however, as one would expect, but instead continues running unsuspectingly into thin air. Only when he senses something wrong and looks down to realize that there is no solid ground to support him does gravity start to function and he falls into the abyss below.

Being addicted to drugs is to be in a state similar to that of the coyote in the air, having realized the lack of supporting ground. It is a radical way of fulfilling the imperative of enjoyment constantly thrown at us by the contemporary ideology of consumption. The problem of drug addiction is that the extreme enjoyment achieved through use of the drug at the same time also reveals an ambiguity in the ideology of consumption and a fundamental paradox of the capitalist economy of desire. Compared to the ordinary capitalist subject, the addict’s problem is not that he has lost the solid ground under his feet. His problem is, rather, the realization that there never was any such solid ground in the first place. While the ordinary capitalist subject stays unaware, hanging in the air, the drug addict’s realization sends him falling directly into the abyss.
The object of this article is to explore the relationship between drug use and ordinary consumption in contemporary capitalism. The article begins by defining how the consumption of drugs constitutes a distinct form of consumption. Next, there is a look at the relationship between drugs and capitalism. And, finally, drug addiction will be analysed as a collapse of the subject’s economy of desire.

The framework for the analysis is Slavoj Žižek’s theory of the subject. In the course of the article the main concepts of this theory will be presented, including the concepts of the symbolic, the Real and ideology. The aim is to unfold the potential of this particular theoretical approach for understanding drug use and drug addiction, rather than to provide a broad-spectrum discussion of the topic. What is missed by using this theoretically narrow approach are, of course, the nuances between different forms of drugs, different kinds of addiction and all the socio-economic factors surrounding the issue of drugs and addiction. The object of the article is to provide a philosophically founded account of drug addiction as an input to a research field otherwise dominated by neurobiological thinking.

Consuming Drugs

Drugs make us ask what it means to consume anything, anything at all. (Ronell, 1992: 63)

Taking drugs is a form of consumption. But what is the difference between the consumption of drugs like cocaine, heroine, crack and amphetamine and the consumption of more ordinary things like chocolate, cheese, music and films?

If we look at the way drugs are introduced into the body, one preliminary distinction reveals itself. The body is organically predisposed for consumption by being equipped with different bodily openings and sensual organs through which we may consume different things. Chocolate is consumed through the mouth, perfume through the nose, a flower through the eyes and a piece of music through the ears. Even though the enjoyment of these different objects may not be reduced to a purely sensual experience, it is nevertheless the sensual organs connected with these bodily openings that trigger the enjoyment.

A typical way of taking cocaine or heroin is by injecting it directly into the blood through the arm or some other more or less random spot on the body. This form of consumption literally circumvents the inborn openings and ordinary sensual organs of the body. The junkie himself makes a new hole in the body, wherever he chooses to insert the needle. Even when drugs like cocaine or amphetamine are consumed through the nose or the mouth, enjoyment is not mediated by the senses normally connected with these bodily openings. Cocaine is not consumed for its smell nor amphetamine for its taste.
The enjoyment achieved by the consumption of drugs is not due to their perceptual taste, smell, sound, colour, etc. Instead they are consumed for the sake of their psychoactive properties (Goode, 2005: 8–10). The difference between consumption mediated by the senses and extra-sensual consumption is continuous rather than categorical. The enjoyment of drinking alcohol or smoking a cigarette, for instance, is constituted in a blurred combination of sensual and extra-sensual effects. Both substances have psychoactive properties which, however, interact with our sensual perception of the world, catalysing the atmosphere of a party or the pleasure of a meal. In this article I will focus on ‘hard’ drugs such as cocaine and heroin, since the enjoyment generated from these substances involves only a negligible element of sensually mediated effects, if any. By circumventing our ‘natural’ channels of consumption, drugs perform a very direct intervention in the brain’s centres for reward and enjoyment (Gawin, 1991; Koob and Nestler, 1997; Withers et al., 1995). Paraphrasing Ronell (1992: 33), we may speak of the enjoyment thus produced as a form of extra-epistemic enjoyment.

Another feature characteristic of drugs is their particular potential for causing addiction. The question of the addictive nature of drugs is both controversial and difficult. It is debatable to what extent different kinds of drugs are addictive, and whether illegal drugs are more addictive than legal stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine or alcohol. These questions of addiction are particularly tricky in the case of cocaine, which, unlike heroin, does not produce distinctly physical symptoms of abstinence (Goode, 2005: 284). Furthermore, it is open to question where precisely the line between drug addiction and mere drug use is to be drawn. Regardless of these issues, for the purpose of the argument at hand we may conclude that once you are addicted to a ‘hard drug’ the consequences for your entire subjectivity are far-reaching and fatal. Being addicted to coffee has only local consequences for a very limited part of your life, while an addiction to heroine colonizes your entire being.

In the following we shall be exploring the use of drugs as a particular form of consumption, and we shall be looking at the relationship between the two characteristics listed here: the extra-epistemic enjoyment and the undermining of subjectivity in addiction.

Subjectivity and Enjoyment

The concept of enjoyment plays a central role in Žižek’s thinking about the subject and his relation to society and ideology. This makes Žižek’s theoretical approach particularly suited for the investigation of the addicted subject and the consumption of drugs. First, we shall look at some general aspects of the relation...
between enjoyment and subjectivity. Second, we shall apply these to the particular issue of drugs.

Castration
When Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden it was because he let his desires outweigh God’s prohibition against eating the apple. An immediate reading of the story may look like this: first there was Adam’s desire for the apple and then there was God’s prohibition against eating it, then came the transgression and finally the expulsion. Following Žižek’s notion about the relationship between subject, law, desire and enjoyment (jouissance) these four moments should, however, be thought of as simultaneous. Desire is constituted only through prohibition. Prohibition, in turn, is conditioned by its transgression. And the desire for the apple is possible only when Adam is in a state already pointing beyond the Garden of Eden. Desire is thus only possible at the moment when Adam is already expelled. By presenting the story of Adam’s Fall successively, the impression is created that Adam loses something when he is expelled from the Garden of Eden. The truth is, however, that it is only at the moment that Adam is expelled that that which is lost is produced. Only at the moment of expulsion is jouissance produced as that which is lost.

The story of Adam’s Fall illustrates the paradoxical constitution of the subject. On the one hand, the subject is constituted as a desiring subject, a subject missing something, a subject in pursuit of an object, which may fill up its lack and provide jouissance. On the other hand, the subject is constituted by lacking the capacity for complete satisfaction, for absolute jouissance. The subject is in pursuit of something that is basically impossible.

To be a subject is to be part of a symbolic order of signs, language, prohibitions, law, etc. The subject’s reflexive relation to himself and to his own desires is made possible only through the symbolic order. The symbolic order makes possible the subject’s verbalization of his own lack: ‘I want an ice cream’, ‘I need a new car’, ‘I miss having a girlfriend’. The symbolic order, however, is not a one-to-one representation of subjective needs that were already there beforehand. A kind of simultaneity is at play whereby desire, the object of desire and the representation of both is constituted in one and the same moment. On the one hand, the symbolic order enables the subject’s identification of his desires with different objects within the order. But on the other hand it is also the symbolic order that founds the subject’s constitutive lack of Being, which is the very precondition for desire at all.

The symbolization of desire is at the same time the condition of impossibility of the complete satisfaction of desire. In order to describe the constitution of the
subject Žižek uses the rather dramatic concept of *symbolic castration*. This is illustrated with the Fall of Adam:

> [W]hen Adam chooses to fall in order to retain *jouissance*, what he loses thereby is precisely *jouissance*. . . . Adam loses X by directly choosing it, aiming to retain it. . . . That is to say: what, precisely, is symbolic castration? It is the prohibition of incest in the precise sense of the loss of something which the subject never possessed in the first place. (Žižek, 1997: 15)

The tree bearing the apple that Adam eats is the Tree of Knowledge. This suggests a contradiction between knowledge and the absolute *jouissance* found in the Garden of Eden. In similar fashion, the subject becomes subject by gaining knowledge about his own desires through the symbolic order. With this reflexivity, a kind of alienation is installed in the subject’s self-relation, which renders impossible the full complementing of the subject, and makes impossible the experience of absolute *jouissance*. ‘[A]ccess to knowledge is then paid with the loss of enjoyment – enjoyment, in its stupidity, is possible only on the basis of certain non-knowledge, ignorance’ (Žižek, 1989: 68). In other words, the price of becoming a subject is to deposit in the symbolic order a piece of enjoyment, a remainder, so that all future enjoyment can only become a derivative of the absolute enjoyment.

This ‘piece of enjoyment’ has a rather complex status in the symbolic order. The story of Adam’s Fall illustrates how it was never there in the first place. Nevertheless, it now plays a crucial role in the symbolic order. We may say that enjoyment circles around within this order. It does not circulate as real, however, but as virtual. The image is projected into the symbolic order that the subject may find here its lacking part, that the symbolic order does contain the possibility for absolute enjoyment. Hereby the subject is linked to the symbolic order.

Applying Žižek’s concept of the castrated subject, the fundamental existential question of the subject may be said to be the following: how can I (re)gain my (lost) enjoyment? The symbolic order willingly provides a variety of answers to this question. By offering different objects as exactly that Thing which the subject allegedly lacks for the completion of itself, the symbolic order shapes the subject as a desiring subject. The objects offered are constituted as ‘sublime objects’. Crucial to this procedure, if it is to reproduce itself, is the keeping of the subject in a constant suspension, where on the one hand the object is presented as the answer to the subject’s problem, while on the other hand the object is kept at a distance from the subject in order to retain the object’s status as sublime. ‘[D]esire’s *raison d’être* . . . is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire’ (Žižek, 1997: 39).
Enjoyment and Capitalism

Today . . . our politics is more and more directly the politics of jouissance, concerned with ways of soliciting, or controlling and regulating, jouissance. (Žižek, 2006: 309)

In any society desire and enjoyment are very much a matter of ideology. We will now see how this is particularly the case in contemporary capitalism.

As analysed by Weber (1905), capitalism in its earlier stages was permeated by a high degree of Protestant asceticism. Instead of using his profit to buy objects for consumption and immediate enjoyment, the capitalist was urged to cut back on spending in order to invest as much as possible in the recirculation of capital. Profit was not a means to enjoyment but rather a promise of future enjoyment in the afterlife.

The spirit of contemporary capitalism, however, seems no longer to be found in the sphere of production but rather in the sphere of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970; Bauman, 1998; Campbell, 1987). Consumption and enjoyment are no longer vices but rather virtues, and we are constantly bombarded by demands for us to buy, consume and enjoy. Commercials of all different sorts of course play a crucial role here, since they not only make us aware of any needs we may have, but also install in us desires that we did not have in the first place. In the consumption society, the commercial is a fundamental part of the production apparatus, since it produces and reproduces the society’s capacity for consumption. ‘The system of needs is a product of the system of production’ (Baudrillard, 1970: 74).

In his diagnosis of contemporary capitalism, Žižek also directs his focus at consumption. For example he identifies Coca-Cola as the ultimate capitalist merchandise and uses it to illustrate how the reproduction of the capacity for consumption works:

It is no surprise that Coke was first introduced as a medicine – its strange taste does not seem to provide any particular satisfaction; it is not directly pleasing and endearing; however, it is precisely as such, as transcending any immediate use-value (unlike water, beer or wine, which definitely do quench our thirst or produce the desired effect of satisfied calm), that Coke functions as the direct embodiment of ‘it’: of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfaction, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise. (2000: 22)

When the commercial tells us ‘Coke is it’ and ‘Enjoy Coca-Cola’, the ideological subtext is that Coca-Cola is precisely that object which can satisfy our desire, give us the full real enjoyment. Coca-Cola is allegedly the answer to the lack of Being constitutive to our desire. The real consumption of Coca-Cola, however, has the exact opposite effect of satisfaction, since it makes us want even more. It reproduces rather than satisfies our desire.
It is not only the commercials that urge us to consume and enjoy. The command is found also in other places than the market. Žižek goes as far as saying that contemporary consumption society is a post-Oedipal society, where the rule against excessive enjoyment is turned around, into an imperative saying: Enjoy! (1999). Enjoyment is no longer only allowed; it is simply obligatory (Declercq, 2006; Žižek, 2006: 310).

By way of this imperative we start acting as consumers, not only in the market but in a wide range of other spheres (Bjerg, 2005: 283). This may be in the political sphere, where real political events are perceived as entertaining spectacles to be experienced, consumed and enjoyed, and not as moral problems calling for engagement and contemplation. This may be in our working life, where we are expected not only to do the tasks demanded by our employer but also to do them with joy and passion. Or it may be in our love life, where the demands for immediate passion and self-development in the relationship are ever growing, while it is almost considered sinful to stick together out of habit or for practical reasons.

Is this enjoyment society not the realization of our wildest fantasies about free access to whatever objects we may desire? If there is unlimited access to everything, does this mean that there is no ideological regulation of desire?

The best answer to these questions is probably that ideology has just taken on another form. An important aspect of the ideology of consumption is the fact that the seemingly liberal approach to enjoyment is followed by an equally effective definition of what is enjoyable and what is not. There is an explicit imperative saying, Enjoy!, and an implicit standard for the appropriate ways of pursuing enjoyment.

According to Žižek, this permissiveness takes the form of a totalitarianism saying:

I know better than you do yourself what you really want, what is in your best interests, so what I order you to do is what you, deep within yourself, really unknowingly desire, even if you seem superficially to be opposed to it! (2000: 134)

Hereby the distinction between duty and enjoyment (as we find it for instance in the Kantian moral philosophy) is collapsed and the very pursuit of enjoyment becomes a duty in itself, which may even be associated with guilt. ‘In a “permissive” society, subjects experience the need to “have a good time”, really to enjoy themselves, as a kind of duty; consequently, they feel guilty if they fail to be happy’ (Žižek, 2000: 135).

The point is not that it is never pleasurable to go to work or be with your girlfriend. There is, however, a constitutive deficit in our actually experienced
enjoyment compared to the enjoyment promised by the symbolic order of consumption society. Regardless of how refreshing we may find a Coke on a hot summer’s day (and it may in fact be more tasty than Žižek claims, in order to make the example fit his argument), it is never quite ‘It’ or ‘the Real Thing’. The consumption society exploits the subject’s constitutive lack of Being by staging various objects of consumption as being exactly the lacking piece that will complement the self. This goes for Coke as well as for work or love. The enjoyment actually experienced, however, is always only a derivative of the absolute enjoyment that would make us fully satisfied and eliminate our desire for anything else or for more. By sustaining the subject in a constant feeling of ‘this is not quite It’, a steady reproduction of desire for more and new objects of consumption is secured. The ideology of consumption promises the subject that it will regain the enjoyment deposited at the entrance to the symbolic order (i.e. at the moment of symbolic castration) by means of the objects of consumption.

**Reality and the Real**

Symbolic castration, whereby the subject becomes a subject through inclusion into the symbolic order, may to some extent be described as a form of ‘social construction of the subject’. Žižek, however, differs from prevalent forms of social constructivism by pointing to the fact that the symbolic order is never able to close itself fully around itself and operate in a completely self-reliant way. The concept of the Real plays a central role here. Symbolization is always incomplete. It always leaves a remainder, a void, a blockade, where symbolic representation is impossible. At the same time this remainder is the very condition of possibility for symbolization. The remainder is the Real. ‘[T]he Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes)’ (Žižek, 1989: 169).

The Real is not to be confused with the reality we speak of when we say that ‘reality is socially constructed’. The Real is rather what is in surplus when reality has become socially constructed. Precisely because the Real is not a product of the process of symbolization it may work, in an almost Gödelian fashion, as a guarantee for this process, as an anchor point (point de capiton).

For things to have meaning, this meaning must be confirmed by some contingent piece of the real that can be read as a ‘sign.’ The very word sign, in opposition to the arbitrary mark, pertains to the ‘answer of the real’: the ‘sign’ is given by the thing itself, it indicates that at least at a certain point, the abyss separating the real from the symbolic network has been crossed. (Žižek, 1991: 32)

Symbolic castration is a form of cancellation of absolute enjoyment, jouissance. It is a cancellation of the Real. Castration is not complete, however, in so far as
the subject retains a certain limited capacity for enjoyment. As we have seen, enjoyment is appropriated as an element in the functioning of the symbolic order. Capitalism legitimates itself by providing objects to give the subject enjoyment, albeit only in derivative measure. These fragments of enjoyment function as pieces of the Real, confirming the meaning structure of the symbolic order of capitalism.

As long as enjoyment is mediated by sensual perception, it is distributed in a social system functioning according to certain principles of regulation. This allows for a control of enjoyment, whereby enjoyment functions as a confirmation of the symbolic order of a given society; that is, within capitalism the subject finds enjoyment in the objects produced by the capitalist mode of production.

Real Enjoyment

Taking drugs, however, produces another form of enjoyment, which is not socially mediated in the same way. Drugs intervene directly into the pleasure centres of the brain, thus circumventing the symbolic principles of regulation described above. As we shall see this may have critical consequences on an ideological level.

From a neurophysiological point of view, addictive psychoactive drugs function by manipulating the exchange of neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin in the brain. These transmitters play a crucial role in the release of enjoyment and the regulation of the subject’s mood as such. Dopamine has even been called a ‘pleasure hormone’ (Goldstein, 1997). Cocaine attaches to the proteins supposed to transport the transmitters away from the particular brain centre (nucleus accumbens) where the transmitters have initially caused stimulation, thus creating an accumulation of – among others – dopamine in this centre, the subjective result being the feeling of a ‘high’ (Koob and Nestler, 1997). Heroin functions by inhibiting that particular group of neurotransmitters (GABA) which themselves normally inhibit the release of dopamine from the ventral tegmental system. The net result of this double negation is an increased release of dopamine, again leading to an increased stimulation of nucleus accumbens (Goldstein, 1991).

Neurophysiologically, cocaine and heroin function differently; but phenomenologically they share the same basic features that are also – to various degrees – at play in other psychoactive drugs: a state of extreme euphoria, rush and enjoyment followed by a state of exhaustion, depression, anhedonia, dysphoria and craving. Both states take place more or less independently of the social and psychological situation the drug user is in, and they represent a kind of detachment from reality. By intervening directly in the brain, psychoactive drugs like cocaine and heroin create a short circuit in the otherwise socially mediated system for release of enjoyment. Žižek describes this as a kind of real jouissance:
What drugs promise is a purely autistic jouissance, a jouissance accessible without a detour through the Other (of the symbolic order) – jouissance generated not by fantasmic representations but by directly attacking our neuronal pleasure centers. It is in this precise sense that drugs involve the suspension of symbolic castration, whose most elementary meaning is precisely that jouissance is accessible only through the medium of... symbolic representation. This brutal Real of jouissance is the obverse of the infinite plasticity of imagining, no longer constrained by the rules of reality. (2006: 190)

Drugs provide an enjoyment beyond meaningful explanation. There is no sensible reason for the drug user’s enjoyment. It is beyond the causality of symbolic reality. Since enjoyment generated by drugs is detached from the symbolic circulation of enjoyment, it is also free from the limitation constitutive to symbolically mediated enjoyment. As Žižek formulates it here, drugs suspend the symbolic castration and the road is cleared for an absolute or real jouissance. To be ‘high’ is to experience such absolute jouissance. The suspension of castration manifests itself very concretely when crack users report having had hour-long erections, minute-long sexual climaxes and multiple orgasms (Courtwright, 2001: 103; Lenson, 1995: 21).

One crack user describes the experience of taking drugs: ‘The best way I could describe the high is that it’s like having sex without having sex’ (Trujillo, 2004: 172). A famous Lacanian slogan says: ‘There is no such thing as a sexual relationship’ (1973: 58). This of course does not mean that people never have sex. The point is rather that the sexual relation between man and woman is never a complementary union of two opposites together forming a complete whole. Our fantasies about sex may have this image – that in the sexual relation we will find that particular piece of Being that we allegedly lack in order to become a full and complete self. The realization of the sexual relation may certainly be enjoyable to some extent but, compared to the fantasy about the absolute completion of the self and absolute enjoyment, it is doomed to be a disappointment. If we allow for a Lacanian paraphrase of the crack user’s statement above, we may say that taking drugs is like having the kind of sex you fantasize about without having sex in reality, thus avoiding the disappointing realization that the fantasy can never be realized.

We have seen above how the subject is linked to the symbolic order, on the one hand by being promised that through the symbolic he will (re)gain its lack of Being, and on the other hand by never quite being given what he lacks. Using drugs, however, the subject is released from the symbolic and instead thrown into an ‘autistic-masturbatory, “asocial” jouissance’ (Žižek, 2006: 311). The feeling of being high is a feeling of completeness, a feeling of having found something which one has vainly sought in the symbolic order. A crack user puts it this way:
Oh my God, I had found what I had been looking for. . . . I remember consciously having that thought the very first time. So I believed inside my heart that like the first time I used I was addicted. Like, you know, it was the feeling that I had been searching for. (Trujillo, 2004: 173)

The drug seems to remove the alienation constitutive to the subject. The drug takes away the feeling of lack and the subject floats into a state of pure and full Being. The complete satisfaction of desire experienced by the drug user in his high is at the same time a momentary cancellation of his desire. Together with the desire, his engagement in social reality, and thereby a fundamental part of what makes him a subject at all, also disappears. His state is not mediated by a sensual reality but is directly caused by an intervention from the Real.

Being high is a border-line condition. Physically and existentially it puts a huge strain on subjectivity and the state can only be maintained for a limited period of time. And when it stops it does not just retreat unnoticed. Just like the drug-induced real jouissance of the high, the subsequent pain and come-down are also detached from symbolic reality. The misery of the drug user is not caused by anything perceptible or meaningful in reality, and hence there is nothing perceptible or meaningful that may liberate him from his misery. The come-down is created by the Real and it may only be removed by the Real, either by the after-effects of the drug receding or by a renewed consumption of the drug.

By transcending symbolic reality, the drug user may also be said to transcend the sphere of desire. As we have seen, desire emerges as a result of symbolic castration whereby the subject is integrated into the symbolic order, structuring his desire and pointing him in the direction of different sublime objects endowed with certain symbolic meaning. The drug user, however, desires no object for its sensible or symbolic qualities. What the drug user looks for in the drug is an effect beyond the causality of symbolic reality. The drug user seems to be no longer a castrated subject of desire but rather a de-subjectivized body of drive. ‘Once we move beyond desire – that is to say, beyond the fantasy which sustains desire – we enter the strange domain of drive: the domain of the closed circular palpitation which finds satisfaction in endlessly repeating the same failed gesture’ (Žižek, 1997: 30).

Symbolic castration installs an element of alienation and distance in the subject’s self-relation, whereby the immediate drive is exchanged for socially mediated desire. As the drug user develops addiction to the drug, alienation is dismantled and he regresses into an unmediated, de-subjectivized self-relation which has the characteristics of drive rather than desire. An addicted crack user describes the drug craving:

I mean, when you talk about thirsty. Well, ‘I’m thirsty man.’ Well, do you know what it’s like to be hungry, really hungry? Those are extreme different sensations so it’s not really the same,
but it's the same. Do you know what it's like to have to use the bathroom, really have to use the bathroom? Well, if you could understand those fundamental things then you'll understand that it's the same thing. To be hungry, to want a hit, to crave, you know, CRAVE. Just even the word, ‘craving’ means, ‘I want it now, immediately, pending.’ This is what that means. ‘I am thirsty now. I want it now.’ That's what that means. ‘I want it now. And that's what I want. I want it now.’ (Trujillo, 2004: 174)

While being high gives a feeling of completeness, unrestrained by the causality of social reality, the craving of the drug user is the direct opposite. In his come-down he is still free from the causality of social reality, but now in a way that puts him in a state of radical lack. This state of craving is just as compelling as the state of being high is liberating. There are no degrees of freedom in the craving drug user’s self-relation and this relation is exclusively determined by the craving for drugs. The craving drug user’s relation to himself is not mediated by meaning. His Being is instead exclusively dictated by his condition as a physical body and this condition announces itself with such all-encompassing, immediate and compelling force that there is no room for meaningful interpretation. There is no room for the subject to transcend himself so to speak. ‘The crack abuser’s truth comes to be principally in the living body; World-significance is appropriated by who he physically is. Being-high frees him to-be. Being-craving annuls that freedom’ (Trujillo, 2004: 183). The regression of the craving drug user into the domain of drive and the reduction of his subjectivity to a living body should not be confused with a simple move into the domain of pre-symbolic animal bodily instincts. Žižek explains the relation between drive and bodily needs:

[Drive as such is death drive: it stands for an unconditional impetus which disregards the proper needs of the living body and simply battens on it. It is as if some part of the body, an organ, is sublimated, torn out of its bodily context, elevated to the dignity of the Thing and thus caught in an infinitely repetitive cycle, endlessly circulating around the void of its structuring impossibility. (1997: 31)]

The reduction of the subject to a bare and fragmented body may also be formulated as an elimination of the self through a short circuiting of its economy of desire. The absolute enjoyment cancels desire by satisfying it. This causes a momentary elimination of the self. The craving for drugs works the other way around but with the same result. In the come-down desire is accelerated to such degree that again subjectivity disappears into an all-encompassing drive. Burroughs speaks about the ‘total need’.

Junk yields a basic formula of ‘evil’ virus: The Algebra of Need. The face of ‘evil’ is always the face of total need. A dope fiend is a man in total need of dope. Beyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: ‘Wouldn’t you?’ Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do anything to satisfy total need.
Because you would be in a state of total sickness, total possession, and not in a position to act in any other way. Dope fiends are sick people who cannot act other than they do. A rabid dog cannot choose but bite. (1959: vii)

Life telescopes down to junk, one fix and looking forward to the next. (1953: 22)

Ordinarily the subject is sustained in a desire for objects, which he will never quite get. Thus he never quite realizes that not even the absolute possession of these objects would provide the enjoyment and satisfaction of which he fantasizes. The ordinary subject believes that he knows what he really desires. This belief, however, contains an element of doubt. When the symbolic order presents the subject with an object of desire this is received with a grain of reservation or reflection insofar as the subject can never fully recognize himself in the symbolic mirroring of his desire. The subject always feels more or less misrecognized and it is, as we have seen, this misrecognition which is the condition of possibility for subjectivity. The subject is sustained as subject through a constant individual appropriation of the misidentifications of the symbolic order.

The craving drug user knows precisely what he really needs. He has not derived this knowledge from any social authority and it is not saved in some symbolic medium in his memory. It is a knowledge that gives itself in a real and immediate fashion. ‘I want it now,’ as the drug user above keeps repeating. Reading the whole passage it is obvious how this is a desire not translatable into words. This is because it is a drive, which is not symbolically mediated. Words are both insufficient and superfluous in regard to this drive since it operates beyond the sphere of symbolization.

Since the drug user’s knowledge about his needs is so clinically cleansed from doubt it does not allow for the distance in relation to the object which is the precondition for the subject as such. We may even go so far as to say that the craving drug user is not even a subject. He is his drive. The drive has colonized subjectivity. The comparison to having to use the bathroom is very appropriate. The more compelling this need becomes the less room there is for an individual appropriation of the need. Ultimately the need to go to the bathroom will satisfy itself in a manner that bypasses the subject entirely.

Both the absolute enjoyment and the compelling craving are beyond meaningful explanation and reasoning. On his girlfriend’s question as to why he keeps doing drugs a crack addict answers: ‘I don’t know. But I just got to have it’ (Trujillo, 2004: 177).
Drugs and Capitalism

Junk is the ideal product . . . the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy . . . The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client. He pays his staff in junk. (Burroughs, 1959: vii)

In the story of Adam’s Fall we find the image of the Garden of Eden as a place where complete satisfaction may be found. The story is a fantasy of a place where complete jouissance is possible. The function of fantasy is to hide the traumatic fact that jouissance is not possible, that alienation is constitutive of subjectivity and that the desiring subject and absolute jouissance are mutually exclusive.

In Žižek’s terminology ideology has the form of fantasy. Its function is to mediate the paradoxical relation between the symbolic and the Real and to cover up traumatic inconsistencies and insufficiencies in the symbolic through a projection presenting different pieces of the Real as that which may fill the voids in the symbolic order.

[F]antasy mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality: it provides a ‘scheme’ according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure. . . . This role of fantasy hinges on the fact that ‘there is no sexual relationship,’ no universal formula or matrix guaranteeing a harmonious sexual relationship with one’s partner: on account of the lack of this universal formula, every subject has to invent a fantasy of his own, a ‘private’ formula for the sexual relationship. . . . In exactly the same way, objet petit a is the ‘sublime object of ideology’: it serves as the fantasmic support of ideological propositions. (Žižek, 2006: 40–1)

The Lacanian slogan here according to which ‘there is no sexual relationship’ refers to the traumatic fact regarding the symbolic order that it provides no formula for absolute jouissance. On the contrary ‘desire and jouissance are inherently antagonistic, even exclusive’ (Žižek, 1997: 39). In a fashion similar to the narration of the story of Adam’s Fall, it is up to the ideology of contemporary capitalism to cover up this trauma by maintaining the fantasy that jouissance is possible. The sublimation of different objects within the symbolic order entails a fantasy, that precisely this object is the Thing which may fill the subject’s lack of Being. This fantasy is the pivot point of the capitalist ideology of consumption. So, because enjoyment plays such a central role in this ideology, drugs constitute a very critical issue in capitalism.

The relationship between drugs and consumption capitalism is a very ambivalent one. On the one hand there is a very clear opposition between drugs and capitalism. The opposition is clearly manifested in the brute fact that drugs like cocaine and heroin are simply illegal. You are not allowed to possess them and...
certainly not to trade them. The resistance towards drugs in our society is so strong that regular political campaigns, in the USA under the name of ‘The War on Drugs’, are carried on against them. This indicates how drugs play a role as one of the very basic ‘evils’ of society.

On the other hand, there is a certain homology between the use of drugs and the ideology of consumption in contemporary capitalism. Burroughs points to this homology in the passage quoted above. In a society, where we are constantly bombarded with offers and demands of enjoyment, the drug user should almost be regarded as a saint insofar as he puts his entire existence into the effort of achieving ultimate enjoyment. Žižek pushes the argument even further by suggesting a relation between the ubiquitous marketing of products and the use of drugs.

Do not the commodified provocations to enjoy, which bombard us all the time push us toward, precisely, an autistic-masturbatory, ‘asocial’ jouissance, whose supreme case is drug addiction? Are drugs not at the same time the means for the most radical autistic experience of jouissance and a commodity par excellence? (Žižek, 2006: 311)

In the consumer society the body occupies a central position as the place of desire and enjoyment. The desiring body is our compass when navigating through the endless amount of objects of consumption offered on the market. And it is the enjoying body which tells us that we are on the right track in our endeavour to get as much as possible out of life. Body and enjoyment function as answers from the Real, incarnating, legitimizing and making ideology possible at all. The body is a sublime object and we ascribe to the enjoyment that manifests itself in the body a tremendous meaning, which takes on almost metaphysical proportions. Today a legitimate reason for almost anything ranging from the choice of partner or line of education to the taking of a political standpoint is that ‘it feels right’. If something ‘feels right’ it seems to be beyond rational discussion. Enjoyment functions as universal measure. There is an ideological notion that the body is somehow hooked in to some higher circuit and the feeling of enjoyment should therefore be regarded as having immediate authority. The more ideology is rooted in the body, the more crucial is the control of the body and enjoyment. As Žižek points out, politics today is therefore more and more jouissance-politics. The ambivalent relationship between drugs and consumption capitalism is the expression of such politics.

In order to control enjoyment, ideology has to limit our access to it. The ideology of consumption seeks to hold a monopoly of the production of enjoyment. Drugs constitute an ideological problem since they not only violate this monopoly but simply outbid the object-produced enjoyment of capitalism by offering enjoyment without an object. In an elaboration on Burroughs, the following analysis is suggested by Redfield and Brodie:
The drug itself, as object of desire, is at once utterly coercive and nugatory: it’s junk, the broken residue of useful technology, the leavings of instrumental reason; as an object it no longer makes sense and belongs in a junkyard. Yet it is also the ‘ideal product.’ It sells itself; and in doing so it reverses the official relation between consumer and product, to reveal a hallucination that is in fact the truth of consumer capitalism. . . . ‘Junk,’ to Burroughs, takes the power of the commodity to its limit, stripping the object of any remains of aesthetic glamour or illusions of usefulness, collapsing it into a black hole. (2002: 7–8)

Earlier it was shown how the drug user’s enjoyment circumvents the symbolic order. In this way, this particular enjoyment also immediately evades ideological regulation. And this is perhaps where we find the real reason for consumption capitalism’s opposition towards drugs. ‘We do not object to the drug user’s pleasure, per se, but we cannot abide the fact that his is a pleasure taken in an experience without truth’ (Derrida, 1989: 26). The drug user commits a kind of counterfeiting in the economy of desire since he satisfies his desire with an enjoyment produced outside of the official symbolic circulation regulated by capitalism and independently of the ‘truths’ produced in this circulation. Drugs constitute a far more fundamental problem for ideology. Drugs simulate the sense-mediated enjoyment offered by ordinary objects of consumption. Drugs are the real Thing since they provide access to the absolute enjoyment which ordinary merchandise only promises to deliver. Compared to the enjoyment produced by sniffing a line of cocaine, it must be considered a misleading trade description when Coca-Cola is marketed under slogans such as ‘Enjoy’ and ‘The Real Thing’. If anything, coke and not Coke® is ‘The Real Thing’.

The enjoyment of the drug user is so absolute that it may undermine his desire for anything else, thus developing into an addiction. Experiments have shown that, given the opportunity of self-administering doses of cocaine, laboratory animals will prefer the drug to food, sex and water to such degree that eventually they will starve themselves to death (Johansen and Fischman, 1989). A similar effect seems to be the case also with human drug users. A former crack addict describes his all-encompassing craving:

See, the thing is that you’re always thinking about how much more you’re gonna have for your drug. You don’t think about brushing your teeth. You don’t think about wiping your ass. You don’t think about eating. You’re thinking about how much drugs you’re gonna buy now. . . . I could always eat. I could always wipe my ass, brush my teeth. I’ll clean my ass some other time, or go without it. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. (Trujillo, 2004: 177)

The drug user’s craving is focused in one direction. This is problematic to the maintenance of his subjectivity as a castrated desiring subject, but it is also problematic to ideology. The drug is not just one product among others. It is a product the consumption of which implodes the desire for other products. The product to end all products.
The drug user undermines the ideology of consumption by demonstrating how the enjoyment placed as the highest principle of ideology is manipulable, and how it isn’t best achieved by way of the glittering, flashing, beeping and thrilling commodity objects praised on the market but rather by way of drugs so clinically cleansed of sensual qualities that they may hardly be characterized as objects. Drugs are so miserable that they go by the name of junk, garbage.

With Žižek we may see the drug user’s undermining of ideology as a form of ‘traversing the fantasy’. The user does not so much pose a problem to ideology in so far as he transgresses the law against taking drugs but rather, ironically, in so far as he takes the ideological injunction to enjoy literally. ‘[T]he truly subversive thing is not to disregard the explicit letter of Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies, but to stick to this letter against the fantasy which sustains it’ (Žižek, 1997: 29). When the commercial, the employer or the television says: ‘Enjoy!’, the underlying fantasy is that capitalism provides numerous possibilities for enjoyment and that we should put all our effort into searching for these possibilities. This is, however, precisely a fantasy. When taking his drug the user realizes all too literally a fantasy not meant for realization. The result is catastrophic when he says: ‘Stop the search. I have found what we are all looking for. It’s junk, a piece of garbage.’

The drug user demonstrates how the body can be manipulated into enjoyment, and how enjoyment may circulate arbitrarily and independent of symbolically mediated objects. The illusion of the metaphysical anchoring of enjoyment is lost and the body stops being the sublime object around which the ideology of consumption may circle. ‘In “traversing the fantasy”, we find jouissance in the vicious cycle of circulating around the void of the (missing) object, renouncing the myth that jouissance has to be amassed somewhere else’ (Žižek, 1997: 33). The result of the drug user traversing the fantasy is de-sublimation of the body, whereby enjoyment stops being a measure for anything else than itself. The drug user has come too close to the object, too close to the body. The body of the drug user, when the addiction starts taking over, is a vulgar, ordinary, arbitrary object no longer subject to the same devoutness, taboo and sanctification as the capitalist consumer’s body.

Probing for a vein in my dirty bare foot . . . Junkies have no shame . . . They are impervious to the repugnance of others . . . The addict regards his body impersonally as an instrument to absorb the medium in which he lives, evaluates his tissue with the cold hands of a horse trader. ‘No use trying to hit there.’ Dead fish flick over a ravaged vein. (Burroughs, 1959: 86)

The body of the drug user is reduced to tissue, blood and nerve paths and its function is reduced to the de-subjectivized generation of enjoyment or pain in the domain of drive.
The Problem of Addiction

The above analysis of ideology and drugs should not distort the fact that being addicted to drugs is not very pleasant. We will end by asking the question: what is basically the problem for the drug addict? What constitutes drug addiction as a pathological form of being?

You can become addicted to almost anything and addiction in itself is not pathological. You can for instance be addicted to cigarettes or coffee without your entire subjectivity being pathological for that reason. When drug addiction may be qualified as pathology it is because it is connected to a fundamental collapse in the subject’s general economy of desire. Addiction to cigarettes or coffee has only local influence on the subject’s desire for these particular objects, while the structure of his desires in general remains more or less intact. But, as we have seen, the intense experience of enjoyment when using drugs has consequences for the subject’s relationship with his own body. Addiction is embodied (Weinberg, 2002). For the addicted drug user the character of his relationship with the body has become of a more permanent nature. Since the body plays a vital role in contemporary ideology, de-sublimation of the body has wide-ranging effects on the very subjectivity of the subject in question.

Elaborating on the previous analysis of the consumption of drugs we may state that the basic problem of drug addiction, what makes drug addiction pathological, is independence not dependence. As we have seen, we deposit our ability for absolute enjoyment in the symbolic order when undergoing the symbolic castration constitutive to our subjectivity. In this process we tie ourselves to the social order in so far as we internalize the belief that we may here find the objects to satisfy our desires, provide enjoyment and fill out our lack of Being. Symbolic castration makes us dependent on symbolic reality.

The drug user’s experience of absolute enjoyment reveals the secret that the enjoyment thought to be deposited in the symbolic order is not there and was perhaps never there in the first place. Instead, the drug user finds enjoyment in an object (or perhaps rather an abject) beyond the symbolic. He finds enjoyment in a piece of junk, a piece of waste.

When drug use turns into an addiction what happens is that the craving for junk completely eliminates the desire for anything else. The addicted drug user’s desire for the Real makes him independent of that symbolic reality where most other people live. In so far as symbolic reality is what makes him a subject at all, his very subjectivity disintegrates together with his dependence on symbolic reality.

[T]he problem with the addict is not that he desires too much or too freely, but that he stops desiring altogether. Since the user is actually replaced by the drug, addiction here is constituted not by the self that wants the drug, but by the drug that wants itself. (Margolis, 2002: 22)
The addicted drug user assumes a highly ambivalent position in contemporary society, at the same time expressing the truth about the capitalist subject of desire and being radically different from this subject.

When capitalism urges us to enjoy, it is against the background of a desire structured by capitalism itself. This truth about the circularity of desire is very obviously expressed in the drug addict’s relation to the drug. The drug itself is the structuring principle of the desire for the drug, thus undermining the very concept of desire. While the subjectivity of the drug addict is bypassed in his craving for the drug, the ordinary capitalist subject, however, never becomes completely identical to the object of his desire. There is always a minimal displacement, a remainder of dissatisfaction, a sense of never fully having gotten ‘it’, in the subject’s relation to the object. There is a constitutive misidentification in the relationship between the subject and the objects offered by the market. This misidentification is the subject. The minimal displacement is constitutive of both the subject and the reproduction of desire, and hence of capitalism as such.

The capitalist subject never accepts that the actual enjoyment of the consumption of a given commodity marks the limitation of the possible satisfaction of his desire. The consumer does not accept dissatisfaction as a fact of life and is therefore constantly on the move, searching for new objects of consumption to provide even more enjoyment. In this movement the body constitutes a piece of the Real, incarnating the possibility of more enjoyment. The possibility of absolute enjoyment is projected into the body and, when this enjoyment fails to materialize, it is allegedly only because you have not felt deep enough inside yourself, what it is you really want. So you have to feel again and try a new object.

Unlike the consumer, the drug user – and especially the addicted drug user – becomes fully identical with the drug, thus almost collapsing the difference between subject and object. He knows what he wants and there is no displacement or misidentification here. In relation to the body there are no longer any illusions of unexploited or unknown potentials, in search of which the subject may expand. The wants of the body and its capacity for enjoyment are concrete and well known, even though not in a subjective form of knowledge. The body only wants more of the drug. ‘[J]unk produces a terminal capitalist subject, a “grotesque” consumer whose needs and desires have all been replaced by one simple but overpowering bodily need’ (Melley, 2002: 43). The starting and end point of the drug addict’s craving is the Real, and it is not mediated by that symbolic loop which constitutes the subject. Subjectivity disappears in this short-circuiting of desire, veering off into the domain of drive.

Treatment for heroin addiction often involves medication with methadone or LAAN, inhibiting the short- and long-term effects of the drug and levelling out the constant shifting between euphoria and dysphoria (Goldstein, 1991). Despite
massive research in the area, no equivalent to methadone or LAAN has been found for medical treatment of cocaine addiction (Sevarino et al., 2000; Shearer and Gowing, 2004; Sofuoglu and Kosten, 2006). Pharmacotherapeutic treatment is looking for a solution to the problem of drug addiction through intervention into the Real, or perhaps rather through a blocking of the intervention from the Real into the symbolic universe of the drug user. It is assumed that if only the drugs’ production of enjoyment in the user is inhibited his addiction may be cured.

There is no reason to reject this assumption. The problem is, however, that even if the addict’s dependence on drugs is cured the fundamental problem of his independence from symbolic reality still persists. The experience of absolute enjoyment leads to a radical de-stabilization, and perhaps even implosion, of the subject’s entire economy of desire. Even when the immediate neurological dysfunctions and imbalances are dealt with the (ex-)addict’s symbolic universe is still very labile and highly sensitive to ‘cues’ actualizing memories of the enjoyment of drugs and thus triggering renewed cravings (Gawin, 1991; Withers et al., 1995). ‘Even addicts who detoxify completely . . . are not the same afterwards. The brain remembers the chemical shortcuts to pleasure’ (Courtwright, 2001: 94).

In the words of Žižek, social reality is ‘a kind of reality whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants – if we come to “know too much”, to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself’ (1989: 21). The drug addict’s problem is exactly that he ‘knows too much’. He has been ‘too close to the body’ and therefore he knows that it may be chemically manipulated. He knows the drug can provide him with that absolute enjoyment, which he is on the one hand constantly urged to seek in the capitalist society of consumption and on the other hand only granted in diluted form. To the addicted drug user the social reality of consumption capitalism has dissolved.

The difficulty in getting out of drug addiction has to do with the fact that the addiction is caused by a piece of knowledge which is basically true. The capitalist economy of desire is in the first place paradoxical. Logically it is an impossible construction based on the belief that the bodily ability of enjoyment is hooked onto a higher and almost metaphysical principle. The drug addict’s knowledge of the body as being chemically manipulable undermines this economy of desire, causing it to collapse in him on a subjective level. Unfortunately he has the truth on his side. He is in the same position as the coyote in the cartoon and truth does nothing for him but thrusts him into the abyss.
Notes

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1. For the sake of convenience, drug addicts are referred to as ‘he’ throughout the article; this is in no way meant to imply that there are not also female drug addicts.

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